Learning Journals as a Counseling Strategy

Paul C. Burnett and David Meacham

This article explores the use of learning journals as a counseling strategy that can be used to complement a counselor's therapeutic orientation. The authors postulate that learning journals will have therapeutic effects on clients that will lead to enduring positive changes, discuss the development of appropriate learning taxonomies to evaluate learning journals, and make recommendations for practice.

The effects of counseling have been subject to extensive examination including the meta-analyses of Lipsey and Wilson (1993) and Matt and Navarro (1997). The results of these analyses demonstrated the positive effects of counseling interventions but do not indicate how, when, and why these benefits eventuated (Paul, 1967; Shadish & Sweeney, 1991), nor do they consider mediating variables. Much of the research in this area has involved the measurement of quantitative behavioral outcomes and short-term behavioral change (Steenbarger & Smith, 1996). However, there has been a recent move toward more qualitative, process-orientated research (Polkingthorne, 1994). This move addresses the previous methodological myopia but neglects the place of learning in the counseling process. It is suggested that if learning is viewed as underpinning all counseling, then clients should be able to transfer what they have learned from the counseling experience to problematical situations without the need for further counseling.

This view arises from a constructivist philosophy that perceives learning as developing from the ways in which individuals strive to make meaning of the world through cognitive processes (Shaver, 1992). To achieve this in a counseling situation, a catalyst to prompt reflective thought is required. The writing of a learning journal has been used to promote reflection in the field of education, and there is a prima facie case for applying it to counseling. Dewey (1933) stated, "The function of reflective thought is, therefore, to transfer a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled and harmonious" (pp. 100–101).

CONSTRUCTIVIST COUNSELING

Neimeyer (1993), in a metatheoretical consideration of constructivist psychologies, described constructivism as a philosophical context rather than a technique. It emphasizes the proactive, self-organizing features of human knowing and deals with decision-making processes (Anderson, 1990). Cognition is seen as a proactive, anticipatory phenomenon, with clients actively and collectively recording and refining their understanding of the experiential world.

The constructivist approach to counseling is more reflective and elaborative, with the counselor assisting the client to develop a personal construction of reality. Of particular relevance is the technique of narrative reconstruction. This provides an innovative literary perspective on psychological phenomena. Neimeyer (1993) claimed, "the structure of human lives is inherently narrative in form; people constitute and are constituted by the stories that they live and the stories that they tell" (p. 226). Constructivist counselors see their work as collaborative with the client, involving a process whereby personal narratives are recorded and refined to assist the client in understanding. This is a learning process that may use several narrative forms. Personal journals have been used (Mahoney, 1991) to facilitate both self-expression and self-exploration on the part of the client.

LEARNING AND COUNSELING

Burnett (1999) indicated that counselors generally agree on the importance of learning new skills that allow clients to make choices regarding their situations and to transfer learned skills to new situations. This is viewed as part of a lifelong learning process. Although learning has been considered a legitimate component of counseling, it has often been regarded as a means rather than an end (Lambert, 1986). However, Mahoney (1991) stated that "all theories of psychological change are fundamentally theories of learning" (p. 26), and Lyddon (1995) noted that cognitive therapy is based on individual constructs of knowing in a rational or experiential sense, with clients using cognitive processes to resolve psychological difficulties. Consequently, a case can be made to develop counseling strategies that recognize the

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importance of learning, both for counseling and outcome. The use of *learning journals* in the counseling context is suggested as an innovative and workable approach to facilitating long-term learning that will assist the client. However, for this to occur, it is necessary to have a robust taxonomy of learning applicable to the counseling context, valid and reliable analytical tools, and an interpretive methodology that accurately identifies any learning that has occurred.

In an exploratory study that applied psychoeducational ideas to a counseling context, Burnett (1999) asked clients to write a letter to a friend describing what they had learned and how they had benefited from counseling. These letters were analyzed using the Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes (SOLO) taxonomy developed by Biggs and Collis (1982, 1989) to identify learning outcomes, classify clients, and select questioning strategies to maximize outcomes for clients. The SOLO taxonomy provides a framework within which the structural organization of the learning may be located. Specifically, it examines the structure of the response of an individual in order to describe the quality of the learning outcome. It has five levels: Prestructural, Unistructural, Multistructural, Relational, and Extended Abstract, with learning being enhanced with progression up the hierarchy (see Table 1). In the top two levels (Relational and Extended Abstract), learners are able to structure their learning to gain deep personal meaning and understanding.

The following example of a letter written by a participant in Burnett's (1999) study shows what has been learned, classified under the SOLO level of Multistructural (Sound):

> As you know X and I were having problems especially with our communication. It was suggested we go to see a counsellor at Y. We were given a lady and X was a bit concerned because I think he thought she would take my side in the conversation. We found this not so, she was totally neutral and could see both of us were presenting faults so this made X much more comfortable. He does not trust anyone with his thoughts and concerns but after a few sessions he began to open up. She really pointed out our good strengths and achievements in our life, which I feel we tend to forget about, especially X because he feels a failure in lots of respects. We know now we have to focus on a goal and not be responsible for each other but ourselves. I have to stop propping him totally and encourage when he needs it. He's much more helpful around the house and that's great for me when I get home from work. We've got a long way to go but I'm sure it will all work out. (p. 574)

In this response, several aspects of learning are discussed (e.g., faults, strengths and achievements, goals, self-responsibility); however, they are not integrated into a theme. This study found that 18 out of the 35 client responses were at this level.

Burnett and van Dorssen (2000) also used the "letter to a friend" data to develop three taxonomies of learning for assessing the content of what clients learn from counseling: Self, Relations With Others and The Process of Learning and Change, with each of these categories having various hierarchical levels. This work extended the theoretical framework of Saljo (1979) and Marton, Dall'Alba, and Beaty (1993) and applied it to the area of counseling. The analysis of the data was not based on predetermined criteria but on breaking down the textual response into units that could be located within a learning hierarchy. Table 2 indicates the taxonomic framework, together with samples of client responses that suggest the relevance of this approach to counseling. It also indicates that the three learning outcome areas are relevant to counselors irrespective of their therapeutic orientation or the specific problems their clients present.

The results of Burnett and van Dorssen's (2000) exploratory study suggested that clients whose responses place them toward the top of the learning hierarchies are more capable of making meaning of their lives and integrating what they have learned into a broader, problem-solving context. However, the limited time frame and sample size did not indicate the way in which clients progress through the various levels of the developmental hierarchy implicit in the taxonomy.

APPLICATION OF LEARNING JOURNALS IN THE COUNSELING CONTEXT

In the field of education, various types of personal written journals have been used to promote learning and as a basis of assessment. Of most relevance to counselors is the type

TABLE 1

Summary of the Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes (SOLO) Taxonomy of Learning

SOLO Level	Sample Indicators
Prestructural	No evidence of learning or benefit
Unistructural	One relevant aspect of learning reported
Multistructural	
Weak	Limited number of non-related aspects reported with little development of main points
Sound	Several relevant unintegrated aspects learned
Strong	Several relevant unintegrated aspects learned, but some elaboration and attempted integration
Relational	
Weak	Learned aspects integrated into a concept or theme, with elaboration, exemplification, and extension
Strong	All aspects learned integrated into strong theme/concept
Extended Abstract	Integration into strong theme extended to new areas, personal theories for living explained

Note. From "Assessing the Structure of Learning Outcomes From Counselling Using the SOLO Taxonomy: An Exploratory Study," by P. C. Burnett, 1999, *British Journal of Guidance Counselling, 27*(4), pp. 567–580. Copyright © 1999 by Taylor & Francis, Ltd. Adapted with permission from Taylor & Francis, Ltd. (http://www.tandf.co.uk).

TABLE 2

Learning Statements and Levels of Learning Within Learning Outcome Areas

Level and Learning Outcome Area	Client Learning Statement
Self (SL)	
SL0 No learning	"I have not learned anything about myself"
SL1 Survival and basic coping	"I learned how to feel normal again"
	"I learned how to survive"
	"I learned that I can cope with life circumstances"
SL2 Self-awareness and self-acceptance	"I learned more about my feelings, thoughts, and behaviors"
	"I learned to accept myself for what I am"
SL3 Personal change and improvement	"I learned how to improve areas of personal weakness"
	"I learned how to decrease negative symptoms"
	"I learned that I can change"
SL4 Personal growth and development	"I clarified my personal values"
	"I learned how to develop personal strength"
	"I grew and gained as a person"
SL5 Personal world view	"I know what I want out of life"
	"I am in control and responsible for my choices and life direction"
Relations with others (RL)	
RL0 No learning	"I have not learned anything about relationships"
RL1 Awareness and acceptance of others	"I learned to accept others' points of view"
	"I learned to accept that others have strengths and weaknesses"
	"I learned to forgive others for their actions"
RL2 Insights into relationships	"I learned that I have to work to maintain relationships"
	"I became aware of the impact of my behavior on my relationships with others"
RL3 Self as responsive but not responsible for others	"I learned that I cannot control others"
	"I learned that I am not responsible for other people's behavior, thoughts, or feelings"
RL4 Change and growth in relationships	"I learned new ways of responding to others"
	"I learned how to enhance my relationship with others"
The process of learning and change (PL)	
PL0 No learning	"I have not learned anything about changing"
PL1 Insight into the nature of change	"I have learned that change is gradual and step-like"
	"I have learned that the extent of change is related to the amount of effort"
PL2 Knowledge and skills that facilitate change	"I understand the importance of setting goals"
	"I learned that I need to confront problems and deal with them"
PL3 The self as change agent	"I learned that I must help myself"
	"I learned that I am responsible for the choices I make"
PL4 Generalization of change processes	"I learned to be confident when approaching future problems"
	"I learned to apply change processes to other problems I experience or will experience"

Note. From "What Do Clients Learn From Counseling?" by P. C. Burnett and L. van Dorssen, 2000, *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling, 22,* pp. 241–254. Copyright © 2000 Kluwer Academic Publishers. Adapted with permission from Kluwer Academic Publishers.

of journal that provides a means to systematically document learning and promotes self-analysis, reflection, and positive action on the part of the client. There are many claims as to the value of learning and reflective journals. Kerka (1996) saw them as a nonthreatening way to record mental processes and as a tool for growth through critical reflection. Numerous authors (Copeland, 1986; Grennan, 1989; Zeichner, 1986) have emphasized the developmental aspects of journal keeping, noting that journal keepers move through stages of experiential learning: first, recording concrete experiences and feelings; next, reflecting on the experience; and finally, integrating observations and reflections into abstract concepts or theories to make decisions and solve problems.

Similarly, Harland and Myhill (1997) viewed personal journals as a means of developing critical independence for self-appraisal, which allows journal writers to deal with confusing and difficult experiences and develop individual philosophies and responses. They also considered that the expressive mode of the personal journal was a means of facilitating catharsis or self-therapy, with benefit derived from having an appropriate vehicle to express anxieties. This view is supported by Kerka (1996), who claimed that personal journal writing provides a context for healing and growth, while Gunstone and Northfield (1992) claimed that personal journals provide opportunities to examine self-development as a learner in a manner that leads to conceptual change and informed decision making.

Researchers (Francis, 1995; Hoover, 1994; McCrindle & Christensen, 1995) recognized the importance of writing tasks in fostering reflection and in the development of metacognitive thinking. Richardson (1993) saw reflection as facilitating behavioral change to achieve desired ends. Dart, Boulton-Lewis, Brownlee, and McCrindle (1998) were of the view that it is difficult to change behaviors without effecting changes in personal beliefs, which can best be accomplished by encouraging people to use new ideas to adapt their thinking and to modify or relinquish their existing cognitive structures. Ballantyne and Packer (1995) found that writing in personal journals gave people opportunities

to consider their self-development as learners and facilitate informed decision making and conceptual change. Others (Bolin, 1988; Zeichner & Liston, 1987) have found personal journals valuable in facilitating learners' progress through stages of cognitive development to ultimately become reflective learners, with an ability to alter their behaviors to achieve specific goals.

If theories of psychological change are fundamentally theories of learning (Mahoney, 1991), then all approaches to counseling have a learning component. Therefore, it is postulated that keeping learning journals and reflecting on their content could complement all approaches to counseling but should not be considered a substitute for any of them.

Writing in a learning journal is but one part of the counseling experience. It can only be used with clients capable of producing such a journal in a medium lending itself to both counselor and client interpretation. However, if clients are clearly informed about what they are being asked to do and for what purpose and are provided with an appropriate medium for response, then the range of clients who might benefit from this approach may be extended. Learning journals need not necessarily be in the form of written text; audiotapes and illustrations may be appropriate media for some clients.

Ensuring that an individual will follow through on a recommendation made by a counselor, such as writing a journal, can be a limiting factor. Knowing which of your clients are more likely to complete a journal can assist in a positive outcome. Conoley, Padula, Payton, and Daniels (1994) looked at how to maximize the likelihood that a client would implement a counselor treatment recommendation. They described predictors of client follow-through on a recommendation made by a counselor. They found that three variables contribute to predicting whether a client will complete the task: (a) using the client's strengths in the recommendation, (b) matching the recommendation to the client's presentation of the problem, and (c) designing a recommendation with a low level of difficulty. By using these variables, counselors may be more successful in predicting the types of clients that learning journals are appropriate for. These predictors may also assist counselors in formulating a more appropriate treatment, one that they are more confident that the client is likely to follow through on.

Although personal journal writing has been long recognized as a means of facilitating reflective thought, according to Richardson (1993) there is little agreement on the nature and measurement of such concepts. Hatton and Smith (1995) pointed out that journal writing needs careful structuring, but even so, personal, emotive, and reactive rather than reflective responses may eventuate. Problems with using learning journals may arise from lack of literacy, limited or impaired intellectual capacity, lack of structure, feelings of vulnerability in exposing one's life to others, invasion of privacy, a tendency toward self-blame, and imbalances in power in the counselor and client relationship.

To address these problems, Kerka (1996) suggested the following necessary conditions for reflection through personal journals: (a) appropriate individual developmental level, (b) perceived trustworthiness of the journal reader, (c) clarity of expectation, and (d) quality and quantity of feedback. Similarly, Barnett and Bayne (1992) gave journal writers specific instructions requiring the following elements: descriptive (planning, operations, evaluation), analytical (effectiveness and alternative approaches), and affective (feelings and emotional reactions). It is essential that the client receive appropriate instruction on the nature of learning journals and their use in the counseling context. Therefore, the approach indicated in Table 3 is recommended.

In this context, it must be made clear that counseling is, in effect, learning and that journal writing is not only directed at outcomes but has inherent therapeutic qualities, allowing

TABLE 3

Preparation for Journal Writing: Instructional Dimensions (ID) and Counselor Statements

ID	Counselor Statements
Introduction	I'd like to ask you to write a learning journal, which is a kind of diary. You can use it to write down what you are learning from counseling and how you feel about it.
Usage	I would like you to keep a journal because I think it is a good way to help you think and feel about the way you see the world and any difficulties you may encounter.
Competence	There are no right answers and you will not be judged in any way. All you have to do is write down what you have learned from counseling and how you feel about it. If you feel uncomfortable about writing, you can use an audiotape.
Perspective	When you are making the journal it might be a good idea to have a theme to focus your thoughts, like: "What is happening to me and how can I control it?"
Structure	Some writers put descriptions of what is happening in their lives on the left-hand page and their thoughts about these events on the right. Could you do something like that?
Genre	It's important that you write or say things in your own natural way and not try to be a novel writer or a radio broadcaster.
Routine	It's a good idea to complete your journal on a regular basis, making some quiet time each day to record things and think about what they mean.
Power Relations	I'm not going to say "write this" or "write that" but work with you to help you understand what you are learning and how it can be used to help you.
Feedback	It would be helpful to see your journal on a regular basis so we can work through it together, seeing not only what you are learning but how you are learning. Then we can work toward better ways of learning, which will help you deal with any new difficulties that may arise in the future.
Privacy	Unless you wish to discuss it with anyone else, no one else other than us will see your journal.

clients to reflect on and record beliefs and feelings about their concerns. By providing a nonthreatening opportunity for clients to undertake a dialogue in print, it is suggested that the act of journal completion not only provides evidence of learning and a basis for client–counselor discussions but also promotes learning.

Burnett and van Dorssen (2000) have demonstrated that letters written by clients concerning their learning can be used to evaluate levels of learning, with the higher levels indicating personal growth and development. For example, Level 4 of the Self dimension (i.e., SL4, Table 2) of learning outcomes shows, among other things, the development of opinions; values, beliefs and/or attitudes; a sense of personal growth and enrichment; growth in maturity; and development of personal strength. However, studies over time are now required to demonstrate the developmental process and to ascertain the direct effect, if any, that journal writing has on personal growth and development. If a formal evaluation of the learning acquired by the counseling process is required, Burnett's (1999), Burnett and van Dorssen's (2000), or Biggs and Collis's (1982) taxonomies can be used to qualitatively measure learning levels. These procedures can be used to facilitate discussion with the client to promote critical reflection. Such enhanced learning competencies are the foundation of metacognition, which enables the establishment of worldviews to inform decisions and outcomes in problematical situations.

If it is accepted that learning is an essential component of counseling, then its enhancement needs to be addressed. Writing the journal itself will promote learning but also forms the basis for generating a series of questions that the counselor can use with the client to promote client learning to higher taxonomic levels. By using such strategies, the counselor can promote critical reflection and metacognition in the client. *Metacognition* refers to the learners' ability to understand and control their own learning (Brown, 1987). It allows individuals to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of their learning and use this knowledge to approach new issues in a constructive manner. Metacognitive competence on the client's part will allow control over the planning, monitoring, and evaluation of thought processes in a way that can be applied to any new issues. It forms the basis of lifelong constructivist learning, with new knowledge constantly being incorporated with existing knowledge to deal with life circumstances.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

It is not suggested that journal-based learning strategies that focus on reflection should be the prime counseling strategy, but rather that learning enhancement should be considered for all suitable clients and take its place as a mechanism for facilitating counseling based on constructivist learning principles. Researchers working within the constructivist paradigm are ambivalent about traditional data collection methods and assumed linear relationships (Steenbarger, 1991). They use a narrative rather than a computational approach to their investigations, and this approach can be enhanced by the data contained in learning journals and by the qualitative methods used to analyze them.

Future research is needed to refine the types of personal journals to be used with counseling clients and to devise a reliable procedure for instructing and motivating clients to produce journals that allow for a qualitative appraisal of the development of their learning. Further investigation of the analytical tools used to ascertain the levels of learning reached as a consequence of the counseling process seems warranted.

CLOSING REMARKS

We take the view that contemporary counseling, with its emphasis on behavioral change and short-term solutions to current and recurring problems, is not emphasizing the importance of learning in the counseling process. We propose that a learning dimension may be added to any type of counseling used for any client in any situation. We view learning journals as an adjunct to existing counseling approaches, not as a substitution. Journals are one appropriate way to enhance some clients' learning by encouraging the development of reflective thought and metacognition. Again, we emphasize that to ascertain whether or not a client will benefit from learning journals, the counselor should consider the predictor variables suggested by Conoley et al. (1994) and should consider the conditions suggested by Kerka (1996) that are outlined in this article. Finally, we have drawn attention to several learning taxonomies that may be used by a counselor to analyze the progress of a client as a learner and to enable the counselor to identify higher developmental levels, which if reached will permit clients to take better control of future issues that may confront them.

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